

more than one best friend by topangamatthews

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Summary:

El's first best friend is Mike, but he's not her last. (In which she finds out who all of her best friends are.)

more than one best friend

She knows that Mike is her best friend when she's twelve years old.

Before he is her boyfriend, her partner, he is her best friend. He is the first person that ever makes her laugh and that is how she knows at first. It's this burning feeling inside of her to make him do the same—laugh, smile, be happy, anything *good* in the world, she wants to give to him.

That's why when she comes back, for good, she tries to make him as happy as possible. Every time he smiles and looks at her with the same look in his eyes that he always gives her, light and and dark and filled with so much of what she doesn't know yet, she thinks back to their time apart. It's there in the back of her mind, his cracking voice calling out to her with desperation for nearly a year, and she tries to push it away as soon as the images come back to her. Because she's here now. They're *together* now and she never wants to see him unhappy ever again.

And it's obvious to anyone with eyes that that is all Mike wants for her, too.

"The boy would find a way to steal the moon for her if she asked him to," they say, and Mike blushes, immediately making a mental note to ask Mr. Clarke how, theoretically, he could steal the moon. Just in case she ever does ask him.

Instead, all she asks of him is to come over to the cabin to visit her as much as possible. He obliges, obviously, basking in every second of opportunity he gets to just be near her. They read books together in her bedroom, door always open, and he brings board games to play together. But the one thing she loves the most is watching TV with him, cuddled on the couch under a blanket, his arm around her shoulder and her head resting in the crook of his neck.

When he shows up in the afternoons after school, a soap opera is always on and she drags him excitedly to go watch with her. He doesn't understand why she likes them so much, the production quality terrible and coupled with cringe worthy dialogue and god-

awful plot holes. But El's eyes remained glued to the screen throughout all of it, gasping at the arguments that ensue between female characters and tearing up at the confessions of love. It's adorable, he thinks, how absorbed she becomes with the characters.

What Mike likes most though is the way she repeats the dramatic monologues. She copies their tone of voice, their hand gestures, and the first time she does it, Mike's heart twists in his chest. He stares at her, eyes wide and with a quirked up smile as she continues her impression until she notices that he's been staring at her.

"What," she asks, a little worried.

"Do you always do that," he asks her, a little laughter hidden in his voice.

"Bad?"

"No," he reassures her, squeezing her arm while she's still tucked safely into his side. "It's really cute."

They both begin to blush and she returns her head to his shoulder. "You should try it, too. It's fun."

He takes this into consideration and the next time that a particularly dramatic scene comes on TV, he begins to recite the line of the male protagonist, his voice deep and dramatic. El doesn't look at him, simply following and repeating the lines of the woman, like she always does. They end up giving in, laughing halfway through the scene, when Mike pretends to sob like the character on the show.

El knows that he hates the soap operas, that it doesn't even begin to compare with Star Wars or Ghostbusters or Indiana Jones. She knows that he only sits through them for her, that he plays along with her silly recitations because they make her happy.

So when he is the one that begins to drag her to the couch ("*C'mon, El! We get to find out who the father of Cassandra's baby is!*"), and he is the one that becomes the most dramatic in his performances, always managing to make her laugh so much it hurts- she never knew you could *hurt* from being so happy- she knows he considers her his best

friend, too.

“A friend is someone that you’d do anything for,” he told her when they were twelve, and now at thirteen, he goes beyond for her.

Mike Wheeler is her best friend.

She knows that Dustin is her best friend when she’s fourteen years old.

Before they begin high school together, their summers are spent inside the cabin with the rest of the party playing Dungeons and Dragons or on his Atari console where they challenge each other in games of Pac-Man and Space Invaders. He always lets her win, throwing his hat to the ground in feigned frustration with a “Goddamn it, El! Are you sure you’re not using your powers?!” She always rolls her eyes at him, but something inside of her makes her feel special. Dustin loves winning, whether it’s board games or video games or bike races, so it’s a special honor to be the only he will purposely lose to.

That is why on the last Saturday before school starts, she feels like he owes him something, somehow. That is why she agrees to his stupid favor.

He pulls her aside from the rest of the group, pretending to need her help for something.

“Just girl talk,” he tells them with a wide grin, pulling El outside of the cabin to talk to her before anyone else can ask any more questions.

“What is ‘girl talk,’” she asks him when they’re outside, completely ignoring the frantic look on his face.

“It’s when you talk about girl stuff like boys and stuff.”

“Are we going to talk about Mike,” she asks excitedly, always eager for the opportunity to tell people about her boyfriend.

“No, goddamn it, El,” he yells, “I was lying about the girl talk! I need

to ask you for a favor!”

“Oh, okay. What is it?”

“Do you know how the high school auditorium is supposedly haunted?”

She doesn't and so he goes on and tells her about the legend. He tells her how years ago a girl in the band, a drummer, died tragically during a concert when a stage light fell on her head. He tells her how they held the memorial service for her in the auditorium and how people have said that her spirit haunts the place, that they've seen her and heard the distant sounds of drumming when no one else is there. Then he tells her how he wants to use that stupid shit story to prank their class and that he needs her help to do it.

“But why do you want to scare them,” she asks him, still not understanding how exactly she's supposed to help him.

“Because it'll be funny, El,” he says it like it's the most obvious thing in the world. “It'll be a good story to tell for them, a good secret to keep for us, and if word ever gets out that we're the ones who pulled the prank, we'll be legends.”

She considers this for a moment, but gives in all too quickly when she sees the pleading look on his face. His hands are folded and he begins to go down on his knees, repeating “pleasepleaseplease”, so fast that it all sounds like one word.

“Okay,” she agrees, grabbing him by the elbows to pull him up.

“Yes,” he exclaims. He quickly high fives her and then moves on to tell her what he's planning on doing and how he wants to do it.

That Monday, two days after their plan is finalized, they find themselves sitting in the packed building with all of the other incoming freshman. She's sitting somewhere towards the middle, in between Mike and Dustin, who is right in the aisle seat.

The freshman orientation begins with the band playing the national anthem and then the principal joins them on stage to talk about rules, respect, and expectations, and Dustin taps El on her arm three times

to let her know that it's time. She quickly whispers to Mike that she's leaving to use the restroom and leaves the auditorium, peeking inside through the glass doors. When the principal asks the freshmen if they have any questions and Dustin shoots his hand up, El prepares herself.

"Is it true that the auditorium is haunted," Dustin asks the man seriously, causing the other people in there to start murmuring. She sees Mike throw his head in his hands in embarrassment and she smiles before reminding herself to focus.

"No, young man. There are no ghosts at this scho-," he begins to answer when the lights of the auditorium completely turn off for a few seconds, causing the people to scream. When they turn back on, Dustin is no longer there, having used the opportunity to run off, and it causes a panic. With all of the scared yelling, El causes more chaos when she flings one of the snare drums across the stage, nearly hitting the principal. People begin to run around the place with fear, still screaming, and it makes her feel a little bad. When Mike stands up and turns around and sees her standing outside, the only calm one there, he mouths "Dustin?" She smiles and shrugs her shoulders.

"Holy shit," Dustin yells, grabbing El's wrist when he reaches her outside. He has the biggest grin on his face that she's ever seen and it makes her happy that she's the reason for it. They run as faraway as they can together, falling to the ground and clutching on to the sides of their stomach. Their laughter falls off of them easily, both of them out of breath and eyes brimming with happy tears.

"El," Dustin laughs, in between chuckles and with a wide smile on his face. "You are the coolest girl I have ever met."

"Thanks," she responds in between small giggles. "You're okay, I guess."

"Hey!"

And he punches her arm playfully, which sends her back into her fit of laughter. But even throughout the almost painful laughs, something inside of her puts her at ease when she thinks about how Dustin is her best friend and how she's one of his.

She knows that Will is her best friend when she's fifteen years old.

El always felt a special connection towards him, always felt that they were able to understand each other because they had both been to the Upside Down, had shitty fathers, lived in a world they feel they didn't belong in.

She knew he understood her in the quiet moments where they sat together in the living room and drew pictures, waiting for Hopper to get back from a date with Joyce, so that she could go home. She felt he understood her in the awkward moments when she was being forced by teachers to participate in class. She felt he understood her when at a sleepover with the group, she woke up from a nightmare to find out that so had he.

It was this understanding that made her excited when they, officially, became siblings. It would mean she would get to spend more time with the person who related to her in a way no one else really could.

They would listen to music together in his room.

"No offense to Mike, but the songs he puts on the mix tapes he gives you are trash," he says.

They make a mess together in the kitchen when they're in charge of making dinner.

"Eggs are always good," she says.

But it doesn't really click in her head just how much their relationship means to the both of them until Will's art exhibit at a local gallery. It's a big deal, one that everyone in the house is excited for, when they find out that he beat out college students and professional artists. Even Jonathan makes the drive from New York to see it.

The Hopper-Byers' show up to the building, filled to the brim with people wearing fancy suits and dresses and holding wine glasses in their hands as they walk around looking at the art. Will's exhibit is in another room near the back and it takes El a while to get to it,

stopping to look at the other paintings along the way. When she finally does get to it, her eyes falling to the painting in the middle, her breath catches in her throat.

It's an oil painting on canvas of a girl's face, her brown curly hair being blown in front of her face by an unseen wind. Her eyes, wide and dark, each reflecting something different, one upside down trees and the other silhouettes of a group of people. There's a red stream of blood falling from her nose and her lips are parted in a way that almost seem to whisper. It's her.

Her. The thought of Will spending hours on a portrait of her, all the detail he put into it, causes tears to begin rolling down her face.

"You don't like it," he asks her, voice timid and small, and she knows what it feels like to constantly feel like you're doing something wrong. She laughs and throws her arms around his neck, squeezing him tightly to her until he's hugging her back. It isn't until she opens her eyes, her head peering over his shoulder, that she finally reads what the painting is titled. Underneath it is a small plaque with the name: *My Sister, Superhero.*

Because yes, she is his sister. But she's also his best friend. And he's hers, too.

She knows that Lucas is her best friend when she's sixteen years old.

He is the oldest of the group and consequentially, the first to get a driver's license and a car. It's his dad's old one, but he loves it more than anything, washing it every weekend and always talking about it like it's a person.

"Do not get into Farrah before wiping your nasty ass shoes on the pavement first!"

"This car is not a 'Farrah!' It's a 'Betty White!'"

"Fuck you! You can walk home!"

El loves the way he talks about how freeing it is not having to rely on anyone to take him where he wants to go. How he sometimes goes on

late night drives around town just to clear his head. How it makes him feel like an adult, being behind the wheel and allowed all of that responsibility. She wants all of that.

She asks Hopper to teach her how to drive, but just one time out in the parking lot and he screams so badly that she begins to sob and he decides that he never wants to do that ever again. She would ask Mike, but he's barely learning himself. So she asks Lucas and he happily obliges, honored that someone would ask him how to learn to drive.

He tells her that he'll pick her up at her house Saturday in the morning so they can drive when not a lot of people are on the road. He tells Mike that no, he can't come along because he's too much of a distraction to her, to which he pouts and rolls his eyes. And on Saturday, Lucas drives up to find El sitting on the porch waiting for him, a big smile on her face in anticipation.

"Thanks again for teaching me, Lucas," she says when they've reached the outskirts of town and switches seats with him. She buckles herself in and turns on the car, adjusting her mirrors.

"No problem, Ellie Jane," he tells her, buckling himself in. He's the only one that calls her that, a habit since it first slipped out years ago after they shared a dance together at the snowball and he got nervous afterwards for whatever reason. It made her laugh then, how embarrassed he had been, but she had encouraged him, telling him "Ellie Jane" sounded pretty. He had called her that ever since.

"Okay," he says, "Do your thing."

Which he learns within seconds is the wrong thing to say because she puts the car in drive and steps on the gas pedal with all of her power, sending them speeding onto the road. His high pitched shrieks fill the car and he holds on to the handle on the roof for dear life as she swerves on the road at more than seventy miles an hour.

"Stop screaming, you're distracting me," she yells, her grip tightening on the steering wheel and trying her hardest not to cry, suddenly feeling very nervous.

“Pull this car over right now,” he screams at her.

“I don’t know how!”

“Get your foot off the gas pedal!”

She does what he says and he leans over to take the wheel from her, moving them off the road and into the dirt until they finally stop. She steps on the brakes, finally, and puts the car in park before turning it off.

Lucas swipes the keys out of the ignition before turning to her to yell, “You drive like a madman!”

“Well you scream like a girl,” she yells back but her voice is choked and he realizes that she’s crying. She takes off her seatbelt and throws her head in her hands, sobbing loudly. “I’m never going to get my license.”

She thinks about all the freedom that Lucas has with it and how she’ll never have it. It makes her cry even harder. He feels bad then, remembering how terrible his own dad had made him feel when he first started driving and almost bumped into another car coming out of a parking lot.

“Ellie Jane,” he breathes, taking off his own seatbelt and reaching over to rub her back in an attempt to calm down her. “You’re just learning how to drive, but you’ll get better.”

She doesn’t say anything and he continues, “I’m sorry that I screamed at you. I just got scared, that’s all. I didn’t want to die.”

“Asshole,” she scolds, finally looking up at him and smacking his chest. He laughs at the look on her face and her arms crossed in front of her.

“I don’t think you want to die, either,” he teases. “Don’t you want to live long enough to get your license? That way you can drive to Mike’s house whenever you want.”

She smiles a little at that and begins to wipe away her tears.

“And if you die, Mike is going to die a virgin and I can’t let that happen to him.”

“Lucas,” she exclaims, blushing and hitting him on the chest once before laughing along with him. It’s in this moment, when they’re laughing at the expense of her boyfriend (who she loves more than anything, she *promises*, he just makes it so easy sometimes), that she looks over and remembers how much Lucas hated her when they first met. He thought she was going to murder them and she almost accidentally did. It makes her laugh even harder.

“Do you want to try again,” he asks her, already putting his seatbelt back on.

Her heart tugs. She smiles at him and nods, taking the car keys from him and breathing in before starting the car.

She has her best friend in the car and she can’t kill him, she tells herself.

She knows that Max is her best friend when she’s seventeen years old.

When she first met her, she hated her. El is able to admit this with a tinge of embarrassment and regretfulness at the remembrance that she thought that Mike and Max had fallen for each other all those years ago when she was gone. It’s a mistake that the boys never get tired of teasing her of when Mike and Max do homework together or go to the arcade alone (“Ooo, *El*, aren’t you going to go with them to make sure they don’t make out?” “Shut up, *shithead!*”)

She regrets it mostly because she went so long without speaking to her for no actual reason. Max is fun, smart, and able to skateboard, which El decides is much cooler than riding bikes. It’s on skateboards that they go to town together to find dresses for their senior prom, a decision they both regret because, how are they going to carry them back if they find any?

They wander into different stores, getting piles and piles of dresses and stumbling into fitting rooms, showing each other everything they put on for each other’s opinions. It reminds her of when Nancy

decided to give them both all of her old clothes and they spent hours trying them all on, laughing as they walked around El's room in high heels and pretending that they were her.

After what seems like hours of attempting to find even something a little pretty to wear to the dance, something catches Max's eyes. It's a soft pink dress, its skirt falling to the ground in tulle.

"El," she smiles, holding it out to her. "You have to try it on. It was made for you."

El rolls her eyes and scoffs before dragging herself back to one of the dressing rooms to try it on. When she does, she realizes Max was right. It fits perfectly and looks beautiful, almost reminding her of the dress she wore when she was twelve years old, her very first one.

She steps out behind the curtain and Max's face breaks out into a grin before she runs over to her, grabbing her hand in hers.

"Oh my god! You look like a princess! Mike is gonna flip when he sees you," she squeals.

And that is when she realizes everything Max has done for her. She taught her how to skateboard all those summers ago. She showed her how to paint her nails and prank call the mouth breathers from their class. She protected her against mean girls in the locker room and now she had found her the perfect dress. And she's happy, genuinely happy, for her.

El thinks about how they're going to be separated in a few months when they begin college. Max is still beaming at her and looking at her up and down when El stops her and hugs her, her best friend. She feels Max's confusion before she hugs her back and she has to stop herself from crying.

"Let's go find you your dress now," El smiles, before going to take her dress off and putting it back on the hanger so she can buy it.

And a couple weeks later, she's wearing it once again, but this time with heels and soft curls and makeup. Max is wearing the black satin dress that El was able to find for her at a different shop and it makes

her look-

“Bitchin’.” El smiles, taking one last look at her in her red lipstick and straightened hair. They hear a honk outside, the unmistakable sound of Lucas’s car, and she turns to Max one last time. “Ready?”

“Ready,” Max smiles back, taking her hand as they walk outside to join the rest of their friends in the car.

She is sandwiched in the backseat, Dustin to her right and Mike to her left. Lucas is driving and Max sits in the passenger seat. Will is on the floor, legs strewn across it with his back towards the door.

Mike intertwines their fingers and kisses her hair as she rests her head on his shoulder. She looks to Dustin who watches them and he winks at her, causing a smile to spread on her face. Will blushes and rolls his eyes at them and El rolls hers back at him. A song comes on the radio that makes Lucas turn the volume up and Max looks back at her with an excited look as she begins to sing the lyrics.

Soon everyone is singing along to the familiar rock song, their voices resounding out into the night with the windows down. El’s heart fills with warmth, with happiness, with love, as she sees the smiles on her best friends.

Each one.

Author's Note:

i know i was away for a long ass time and that this isn't the "and suddenly you're mine" update you're all patiently waiting for (angels, all of you) but i hope you liked this anyways!!!

i love writing el being happy and am super excited to see her (hopefully (i swear to GOD, duffer brothers)) happy when season 3 rolls around :)